

# Rite and Secular Spirit : Centering on the Ceremony of Carpenter with Hatchet in Kongo Gumi

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# Rite and Secular Spirit: Centering on the Ceremony of Carpenter with Hatchet in Kongō Gumi

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**Abstract:** From the perspective of the study of rite and ritual, the rites of a particular group have hidden their beliefs. Through the study of the form and the history of the certain rite, we can understand the thought patterns and behavior rules behind it. In the scope of the Japanese craftsmanship, Kongō Gumi is considered to be the oldest group of craftsmen in Japan. Despite its long history, research on this group is still very rare, especially in their rites and their traditional craftsmanship systems. Therefore, this thesis starts with the transition process of the ceremony of carpenter with hatchet in Kongō Gumi, introduces the process of transforming from an architectural ceremony into a calendrical rite. Subsequently, this thesis introduces the existing mode of the ceremony of carpenter with hatchet in Kongō Gumi, discusses the ideological representation behind its objects system and behavior mode. Finally, this thesis discusses the religious belief and secular belief of the group of craftsmen behind the rite.

**Keywords:** Kongō Gumi, Japanese Craftsmanship, Rite, History of Ideas

## Introduction

Rite is a set of formal acts, often fixed and traditional, performs on important social or religious occasions. It is generally considered to be the belief in action. Within the scope of cultural anthropology and religious studies, the study of the rite is often an important entry into the common psychology of a certain social group.

In the past, the study of rite and ritual<sup>1</sup> has undergone several transformations. The first genre

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<sup>1</sup> There are two words in English that can be used to express this meaning. one is for the ritual; the other is for

of this kind of research often involves the origin of the ritual. It developed in the 19th century, was represented by the myth and ritual school<sup>1</sup> and psychoanalysis<sup>2</sup>. Subsequently, it follows the social structural-functional analysis<sup>3</sup>, which cares about how the rites promote social organization and social life, that is, the social attribute and functionality of the rite. Nowadays, the dominant school of this research is the symbolic-cultural school, which takes the rite as an independent cultural system. The analysis of this paper will mainly rely on the cognitive system of the latter two schools<sup>4</sup>.

For the carpenter[ 宮大工 ] who is engaged in the construction of temples and shrines, the ceremony of carpenter with hatchet[ 手斧始式、鉦始式 ] is one of the most important rites held by this social group during the year. This is a traditional rite performed in temples and shrines, which is intended to pray for the safety of craftsmanship system for a whole year. Through the tools that remain to the present(the national treasure, the tools and the box of carpenters<sup>5</sup>[ 国宝・「大工道具及び箱」 ] of Nikko Toshogu[ 日光東照宮 ], the tools in Edo period<sup>6</sup> preserved by Shimizu Corporation[ 清水建設 ], etc.) and the ceremonial activities (Shitennoji Temple[ 四天王寺 ], Tsurugaoka Hachimangu<sup>7</sup>[ 鶴岡八幡宮 ], etc.) that are still in progress every year, the ceremony of carpenter with hatchet in Kongō Gumi[ 金剛組 ] has been taken place relatively early, moreover, there are still historical facts with a clear organization and a complete structure.

Compared with the religious beliefs, the extant rite of Kongō Gumi can be regarded as the practice of worldly spirit with a direct purpose, which is closely related to the daily work of the craftsmanship system. This paper will focus on the establishment and the finalization of the ceremony of carpenter with hatchet in Kongō Gumi, analyze the interaction between the

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the rite. In the study of rite and ritual, these two words are often confused. Even though, there are still subtle differences between the two words in previous studies. In the sequence, we can find that the meaning of the two words differs from the norm and order and the practice.

1 Its representative scholars are Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) and James George Frazer (1854-1941). They hold the opinion of rituals are the source of religion and culture, according to the concept of evolution.

2 Representative scholar is Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). This school mainly involves in the mysterious power or emotion, shows enthusiasm for the integration of individual psychological cognition.

3 Representative scholars are Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), Max Gluckman (1911-1975), etc.

4 In the previous studies, this paradigm has precedents, such as Edmund Leach (1910-1989) and Mary Douglas (1921-2007). They maintain a research interest in the social structure as well as the cultural concern.

5 According to the homepage of the Nikko Toshogu Museum[ 日光東照宮宝物館 ].

6 Shimizu Corporation[ 清水建設株式会社 ](2014), p.174.

7 According to the homepage of the Tsurugaoka Hachimangu, the ceremony in January.

techniques, tools and craftsmen presented in the process of this rite. This paper will also analyze the basic conditions of this worldly nobility and the implications of its spiritual core.

### 1. From Architectural Ceremony to Calendrical Rite

In the self-identification of Kongō Gumi, according to the genealogy preserves inside the family, the ceremony of carpenter with hatchet in Kongō Gumi has been taken place as early as 1617, that is, the period when the 25th generation head of Kongō Gumi held the reconstruction of Shitennoji Temple<sup>1</sup>. In addition, according to *The Chronology of Kongō's Family* by Kongō Gumi itself, this rite also appeared in reconstruction of Shitennoji Temple by the 27th generation head in 1669 and the 29th generation head in 1732<sup>2</sup>. At this time, the rite did not become a fixed ceremony which was held every year, but an architectural ceremony accompanied by the major reconstruction activities of Shitennoji Temple.

In the book named *Settsu Meisho Zue* [ 摂津名所図会 ](1796-1798), the ceremony of carpenter with hatchet was drawn on paper as an important activity of Shitennoji Temple. This is the earliest external documentary about this rite which holds highly reliability. The text above records the name, time and place of the rite: on January 11th, Japanese calendar, the ceremony of carpenter with hatchet was held in the Kon-do Hall [ 金堂 ](main hall of a Buddhist temple) of Shitennoji Temple. The text also shows the social identity of the main characters in the picture<sup>3</sup>. We can speculate that, at this time, this rite came to a ceremony which was regularly held by Kongō Gumi at latest. Until now, the rite was still fixed on January 11th<sup>4</sup> each year and has been confirmed as a part of Osaka's intangible cultural heritage (April 1st, 2011, the ceremony of carpenter with hatchet of Shitennoji Temple[ 四天王寺手斧始め式 ]).

We can find that the texts and the historical facts that continue to this day contain a possibility of the development of the rite itself, that is, it transfers from the intermittent architectural ceremony which accompanies the important construction process, gradually becomes a calendrical rite<sup>5</sup>. This may also represent a general psychology: the divine existence often

1 Kongō Toshitaka[ 金剛利隆 ] (2013), p.66.

2 The Chronology of Kongō's Family, referred to Kongō Toshitaka (2013), pp.178-179.

3 The original text is, 正月十一日 金堂手斧始（てをのはじめ） 金堂において毎歳正月十一日正番匠（しょうばんじょう），権番匠，副（そへ）大工立ち双（なら）びて，手斧始の式例あり。秋野坊は座上に堂聖堂仕（どうせいどうし）列を糺して厳重なり。これは皇太子番匠の事を教えさせたまふ遺風とぞしられける。 referred to *Settsu Meisho Zue* published in 1919, pp.154-155.

4 According to Kongō Gumi, the rite was held at 8:00 pm in past days, now changed to 4:00 pm.

5 Recently, there is an influential classification method for six rite types by Catherine Bell (1953-2008). These six types are: rites of passage, calendar rites, rites of exchange and communion, rites of affliction, feasting, fasting

comes from the concrete practice, after that, it will be regarded as high-level, powerful, highly respectable existence, departed from everyday life. The daily life corresponding to it can be regarded as ordinary and actual existence. Thus, the rite holds the distinguishing characteristics, finally derives from the secularity, sublimates to worldly nobility.

When considering about the reason of the rite was determined at such a time, we can speculate that its establishment contains a universal human psychological form, represents the certain work spirit and life spirit of the craftsmen.

What cannot be overlooked here is the meaning of the “beginning” given by this rite. It is consistent with the universal perception of the carpenter’s working conditions under certain historical conditions. When the rite was first established as a calendrical rite, the calendar used by people was still the Japanese calendar<sup>1</sup>. At that time, the carpentry system actually faced the limitations of working temperature and working conditions, for example, the log, after being cut down, has to take a whole winter to ensure the dryness before it can be used as the raw material. In this way, this rite can still be seen as a simple and primitive respect for the laws of nature. It was not until 1872, when the calendar was modified to the solar calendar[ 太陽暦 ](be known as Gregorian calendar[ グレゴリオ暦 ]), the ceremony was shifted to an earlier date according to the revision of the calendar. From then on, the role of dividing the working time and non-working time by this rite gradually shrinks, the rite itself becomes a pure spiritual representation.

In short, the establishment and finalization of this rite has its own evolution process. It does not present a complete form at the very beginning. In the course of its gradual development into a calendrical rite, it integrates the craftsman's own specialty, holds the natural view and life consciousness which are directly related to the craftsman's practice system. At the same time, with the change of the calendar itself, this rite changes to the state of the present.

## 2. Technique and Reputation: Identity Cognition of the Craftsman

As mentioned above, the ceremony of carpenter with hatchet in Kongō Gumi has evolved

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and festivals, political rites. Catherine Bell (1997), p.94.

1 The era of the creation of the *Settsu Meisho Zue* can be regarded as the latest time when the rite was determined as a time calendrical rite. The calendar which was used at that time was the Hōryaku calendar[ 宝暦暦 ]. The ancient Japanese calendar is similar to the Chinese lunar calendar. It is the luni-solar calendar[ 太陰太陽暦 ], that is, the calendar based on the movement of the sun and the moon, regarded on the agricultural production cycle. This calendar contains the simple cognition of human beings and natural relations under the conditions of social and economic development at that time.

into a rite with a fixed process. Its significance is to show the beginning of a year's work of Kongō Gumi in Shitennoji Temple and pray for the safety<sup>1</sup>. That is to say, it has a certain purpose at the beginning of its establishment. In this case, how to make a close connection between the rite itself and the craftsmanship system becomes a very important proposition. At this time, it is necessary to examine the rite process in the present case. (see Table 1).

Table 1 The current process of the ceremony of carpenter with hatchet in Kongō Gumi<sup>2</sup>

Rite Progress	Tools	Rite Performer
worship on bended knees		the chief priest of a Shinto shrine[ 宮司 ] <sup>3</sup> ; all the carpenters
wave the Gobei[ 振幣 ]	Gobei[ 御幣 ] (a wand with hemp and paper streamers used in a Shinto ceremony)	the chief priest of a Shinto shrine
take out the Shakuzue ruler	Shaku-zue ruler[ 尺杖 ]	carpenter
analog measurement		
pack up the Shakuzue ruler		
analog the using of carpenter's ink pad and carpenter's square	carpenter's ink pad [ 墨壺 ]; carpenter's square [ 曲尺 ]	vice master carpenter [ 権大工 ]
ink marking		
take out the hatchet	hatchet [ 手斧 ]	master carpenter[ 正大工 ] <sup>4</sup>
use the hatchet to chop the log		
pack up the hatchet		
take out the Yari-ganna plane	Yari-ganna plane[ 槍鉋 ]	master carpenter

It is worth noting that the core parts of this rite, besides the craftsmen themselves, are the tools they used – the reason of this rite is called the ceremony of carpenter with hatchet, is also

1 Kodomo Kurabu[ こどもくらぶ ]ed.(2015), p.6

Kongō Toshitaka (2013), p.64.

2 Referred to Kongō Toshi (2013), pp.65-67. Supervise by Hamashima Masaji[ 濱島正士 ]and Sakamoto Isao[ 坂本功 ], edited by the committee of *The Teaching of the Five-storied Pagoda* [『五重塔のはなし』](2010), pp.116-117.

3 According to the latest time of the establishment of the ceremony as the calendar rite mentioned in the first part, we can infer that until 1798, the Buddhist clergy was still the religious core of the rite. After the separation of Buddhism and Shintoism (1868), Kongō Gumi was forced to leave Shitennoji Temple for a period of time. It can be speculated that during the time when their territory was lost, this rite was carried out by Shinto ceremony. The influence has continued to this day.

4 Since January 11th, 2014, due to the fact that the descendant of Kongō's family has not made a good technical reserve yet, master carpenter is absent, the right to these processes are passed to vice master carpenter of Kongō Gumi, Uematsu Jyōyichi[ 植松襄一 ].

partly due to the utility of the hatchet in the craftsmanship system of the carpenters. The hatchet is often used as a tool for chopping logs, regarded as one of the tools used in the initial stages of the entire process of woodworking.

According to the difficulty of the tools' usage, the process of this rite shapes the process of self-growth and technological growth of the craftsmen in Kongō Gumi. In general, measuring the size of logs is the most basic technique for carpenters (with Shaku-zue ruler). After that, trying to shape the logs to the woods is a necessary skill to become a carpenter working independently (with carpenter's ink pad and carpenter's square). The tools for the most important steps are the hatchet and the plane: such workflows need to deal directly with large logs, the sunk cost is extremely high. It requires the professionalism of the craftsmen, the craftsmen themselves also hold a grave responsibility. The basic steps of the craftsmanship system contained in this rite show that there are both the personal growth experiences of the craftsman and the responsibility of such professional practitioners in the spirit of this rite.

Starting from this rite, we can also find that it is trying to deal with the relationship between the craftsmen and the tools, even the technique itself. The relationship it hopes to form is not only a relationship of daily use, but also a non-daily, even a divine connection between them. In the circumstances, it is especially prone to generate a kind of psychological identity: the craftsman rises himself from an individual with certain technique to an individual selected or blessed by certain technique, the individual who participates the rite can share the nobility as well.

This kind of recognition system can also be seen in the self-narration of Kongō Gumi: "The behavior in this rite is the highest reputation as the master carpenter."<sup>1</sup> It can distinguish the feature of identity from everyday life, shape the professional identity of the group of craftsmen. This sensitivity about nobility models a stable, regularly internal education system unconsciously, ultimately points to the worldly purpose of safety in the coming year.

### 3.The Intersection of Religious Nobility and Worldly Nobility

As mentioned in the first part, the finalization of the ceremony of carpenter with hatchet in Kongō Gumi can be analyzed as sanctification. On this basis, this rite is based on both religious reality and worldly reality.

First of all, this rite relies on the religious sites and the religious personnel, it is affirmed by the religious sites and personnel as well. The ceremony of carpenter with hatchet in Kongō

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1 Refers to Maekawa Kaiko[ 前川佳子 ], Oumi Haruko[ 近江晴子 ], 2016, pp.96-97.



Gumi is recognized by Shitennoji Temple as an annual event, acknowledged the non-publicity of this rite<sup>1</sup>. It is particularly noteworthy that, among all of the religious ceremonies and activities in Shitennoji Temple, the chance of holding a rite before the principal image of Avalokiteśvara bodhisattva (Kannon in Japanese) [ 本尊・救世観音菩薩 ] in Kon-do Hall is rare. In addition, whether the Buddhist clergy in the picture of *Settsu Meisho Zue*, or the chief priest and the Buddhist clergy in the existing rite, their witness undoubtedly provided the religious nobility beyond the worldly nobility to the rite.

However, this rite also presents a tendency of the secularity. its integration of social relations goes further than its attitude to religion or belief itself. Looking at the specific progress listed in the second part, we can point out that except for the beginning of this rite, the religious personnel is hidden, the most important part of the rite is completely generated by the internal personnel of Kongō Gumi. That is to say, the worldly nobility is risen. Although this rite is wrapped in the outer shell of religion, the content and the essence pursued by this rite are quite secular.

By this means, we have to consider the power consciousness and the relationship of the social group existing in this rite. In the queue when they walking into Shitennoji Temple, the team marches in the order of the carpenter, the vice master carpenter and the master carpenter strictly. The order of their participation of the process is also in accordance with the internal power structure of the social group, At the same time, the most important part of the rite is on the behalf of Kongō's family. Here goes the statement of themselves: "this ceremony is the most glorious stage for the Kongō's family who works as the master carpenter of Shitennoji Temple."<sup>2</sup> By the strong technical connection in this process, the rite itself does present some established social structures: the organizational relationship already existing in the internal practice system becomes strict and regular. Along with this periodic recurrence, the subconscious in everyday life has become a distinct norm. Although it does not intend to shape the authority of a certain individual, it does form the social bond between the individual and the group at large.

All in all, in this rite, Kongō Gumi formed the identity cognition between the group itself and the outside world through the interaction with the religious sites and personnel of Shitennoji Temple, completed the confirmation of the authenticity of Kongō Gumi in the craftsmanship system of Shitennoji Temple. At the same time, Kongō Gumi also strengthened its internal

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1 According to the homepage of the Shitennoji Temple, the annual events of January.

2 Kongō Toshitaka (2013), p.66.



power structure though the executors of the rite, divided their status to ensure the stability of its craftsmanship system.

#### 4. Conclusion

The establishment of the rite arise the community spirit of a social group. In the ceremony of carpenter with hatchet in Kongō Gumi, it contains not only worldly beliefs or ideals, but also the distinctive characteristics of pragmatism.

In the previous analysis of the evolution and the finalization of this rite, we can find out that it shapes the behavior and the spirit of Kongō Gumi from three specific aspects: the work sequence (the power from the history), the personal growth (the identity of craftsmen which is affirmed by technique and tools) and the social identity (social bonds that correspond to the power structure). The form of this rite has an great influence on shaping the practical system and mental cognition of Kongō Gumi

Although the ceremony of carpenter with hatchet tries to break away from everyday life gradually, it still has a strong secular character in its spirit and value. These aspects point to the concern of human being: the rite confirms the worldly nobility of the group of craftsmen while establishing the worldly nobility of itself.

One of the most noteworthy points is how to handle the relationship between religious nobility and worldly nobility. The answer given by this rite itself is that, religious nobility can be placed before the worldly nobility, or be hidden behind worldly nobility. That is to say, religion can regulate the secular beliefs as well as provide certain support for secular behaviors. As for the group of craftsmen, the existence of secular purpose and secular psychology has quite reasonable value, and it is not necessarily to be regarded as the blasphemy of the religion. This kind of intersection of religious nobility and worldly nobility can be seen as the reconciliation in the perspective of pragmatism.

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